

Room at the White House for broadcast on December 3. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on

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Remarks at a Kennedy Center Honors Reception December 4, 2011

The President. Well, good evening, everybody. Welcome to the White House. What a spectacular-looking crowd here. *[Laughter]* I want to start by thanking David Rubenstein, Michael Kaiser, and the Kennedy Center Trustees, and everyone who has made the Kennedy Center such a wonderful place for so many people for so many years. I also want to acknowledge my good friend Caroline Kennedy for continuing her family's legacy of supporting the arts. And finally, I want to thank the creator of the Kennedy Center Honors and the Cochair of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, George Stevens. George and his son Michael are still bringing this show to life after 34 years, and we are grateful to both of them. So—*[applause]*.

Tonight we honor five giants from the world of the arts, not just for a single role or a certain performance, but for a lifetime of greatness. And just to be clear, this doesn't mean that they're over the hill. *[Laughter]* It just means they've come a long way.

Now, at first glance, the men and women on this stage could not be more different. They come from different generations, different walks of life. They have different talents, and they've traveled different paths. And yet they belong here together because each of tonight's honorees has felt the need to express themselves and share that expression with the world.

It's a feeling that all of us have at some point in our lives. That's why we sing, even if it's just in the shower. *[Laughter]* It's why we act, even if we never get past the school auditorium. That's why we dance, even if, as Michelle says, I look silly doing it. *[Laughter]* It's one of the downsides of being President: Your dance moves end up on YouTube. *[Laughter]*

But tonight's honorees take it a step further. By expressing themselves, they help us learn

something about ourselves. They make us laugh, they move us to tears, they bring us together, and they push the boundaries of what we think is possible. And each of them has been blessed with an extraordinary gift. Tonight we thank them for sharing that gift with us.

Barbara Cook has been said to have the most magnificent voice in popular music, but she was born into a family that didn't know the first thing about singing. Growing up, while the other kids in her neighborhood were out playing hide and seek, Barbara would be inside listening to opera on the radio. By the time she was 23, Barbara was starring in her first Broadway show, and she went on to win a Tony for her performance as the original "Marian the Librarian" in "The Music Man."

But success didn't come without pain, and she faced more than her share of challenges, before a show-stopping concert at Carnegie Hall in 1975 catapulted her back into the spotlight. Barbara's greatest strength has always been her ability to put her own feelings and experiences into her songs. As she says, "If I sing about emotion, and you say, yes, I've felt that too, then it brings us together, even if it's just for a little while."

These days, Barbara has been through enough to sing just about anything, so now she teaches up-and-coming singers to do the same. The lesson always starts with "be yourself," a piece of advice that she has always taken to heart. Maybe that's what has kept her so young. And Barbara says that some days she feels like she is 30, and tonight you look like you're 30. *[Laughter]* Some days she feels like she's 12, although her knee apparently does not agree. *[Laughter]* All we know is that we've never heard a voice like hers, so tonight we Barbara—honor Barbara Cook.

Now, Neil Diamond's songwriting career began like so many others: He was trying to impress a girl. *[Laughter]* The difference was that it worked, and he went on to marry the girl. As Neil says, "I should have realized then the potential power of songs and been a little more wary." *[Laughter]*

Even after such a promising start, music wasn't Neil's first choice. He wanted to go to medical school and find a cure for cancer. But then he met reality, which for him came in the form of organic chemistry. *[Laughter]* Neil ended up dropping out of college to take a 50-dollar-a-week songwriting job, and the "Solitary Man" was born. With a voice he describes as being full of gravel, potholes, left turns, and right turns, he went on to sell more than 125 million records. Elvis and Frank Sinatra asked to record versions of his songs, and today, Neil is the rare musician whose work can be heard everywhere from kids' movies to Red Sox games. *[Laughter]*

When someone asked him why "Sweet Caroline" remains so popular, Neil said, "It's because anybody can sing, no matter how many drinks you've had." *[Laughter]*

Now, his shirts aren't as flashy as they used to be; I noticed you're buttoned up all the way to the top there. *[Laughter]* Neil can still—some good laughs here. *[Laughter]* Neil can still put a generation of fans in their seats. And so tonight we honor one of the great American songwriters for making us all want to sing along. Thank you, Neil Diamond.

When Sonny Rollins was growing up, he and his friends would sneak into jazz clubs by drawing mustaches on themselves—*[laughter]*—with an eyebrow pencil—*[laughter]*—to try to look older. Did that work, Sonny? *[Laughter]* We don't know if it fooled anybody, but they did get into the clubs.

Harlem in the 1930s was a hotbed of jazz, and for a young musician with a big horn and bigger dreams, it was heaven. Duke Ellington and Coleman Hawkins lived around the corner. Sonny learned melody and harmony from Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis was a regular playing partner.

It wasn't long before Sonny earned the nickname the "Saxophone Colossus" and became known as one of the greatest improvisers in the history of jazz. Today, he often plays hour-long solos without any repetition, leaving audiences speechless. People sometimes wonder how he can play for so long, but in Sonny's words, "It just means there's something out there, and I know I have to find it."

Sonny also loves to roam the crowd during a performance. One story goes that he was halfway through a solo one night when he jumped off the stage and disappeared. *[Laughter]* Just when the band was about to go looking for him, the solo started back up. Sonny had broken his foot and was lying on the floor, but he finished the set with so much energy and passion, the audience didn't notice.

To hear Sonny tell it, he's just keeping things pure. "The worst thing in the world to me is to play by rote," he says. "You have to play from the inside; that's real jazz." So tonight we honor a real jazz master, Mr. Sonny Rollins.

Meryl Streep was once described as a cross between a den mother and a class cutup. *[Laughter]* I don't know who that was, but—*[laughter]*.

When a reporter asked Clint Eastwood why he chose Meryl to star opposite him in "The Bridges of Madison County," he shrugged and replied, "She's the greatest actor in the world." At 15, Meryl won the role of "Marian the Librarian"—there's a theme here—*[laughter]*—in her high school's production of "The Music Man," following the footsteps of her idol Barbara Cook. *[Laughter]* That led to Yale drama school and then to Hollywood, where Meryl won two Oscars in 4 years. And then she turned 38—*[laughter]*—which, in Washington at least, according to Meryl, is the sell-by date for Hollywood actresses. And she remembers turning to her husband Don and saying, "Well, it's over."

Luckily, it was not over. Since then, Meryl has tackled incredibly complex roles, ranging from Julia Child to, most recently, Margaret Thatcher. Today, she's the most nominated actress in the history of the Academy Awards.

She's tossed aside more than a few stereotypes along the way. Each of her roles is different, and different from what we expect Meryl Streep to be. As she says, "I've picked the weirdest little group of personalities, but I think they've all deserved to have a life." For giving life to those characters and joy to so many of us, let's give Meryl Streep a round of applause.

One final honoree is something of a regular here at the White House. I was telling him we need to give him a room—[*laughter*—the Blue Room, the Red Room, and the Yo-Yo Ma room. [*Laughter*] We keep inviting him, and for some reason, he keeps on coming back. [*Laughter*]

When Yo-Yo Ma took his first cello lesson, there wasn't a chair short enough for him, so he sat on three phone books instead. By the age of 4, he was learning the Bach suites. At age 7, he was performing for President Kennedy in this room. Today, he has 16 Grammys and is considered one of the greatest classical musicians alive.

But maybe the most amazing thing about Yo-Yo Ma is that everybody likes him. [*Laughter*] You've got to give me some tips. [*Laughter*] It's remarkable.

In a profession known for, let's face it, some temperament among its stars, Yo-Yo is a little different. He named one of his 300-year-old cellos "Petunia." He's a big hugger. [*Laughter*] For every question you ask him, he asks you two in return. He's been named one of People magazine's sexiest men alive. [*Laughter*] He's appeared on "Sesame Street." I thought about asking him to go talk to Congress. [*Laughter*]

And yet somehow, he's also found the time to become one of the most innovative and versatile musicians in the world. Yo-Yo likes to say that his goal is to take listeners on a trip with him and make a lasting connection. His sense of curiosity has driven him to experiment from everything from the Argentine tango to Chinese folk music, and he has brought musicians from around the world together with the sheer force of his personality. As he says, "If I know what music you love, and you know what music

I love, we start out having a better conversation."

The great Pablo Casals once described himself as a human being first, a musician second, and a cellist third. There is no doubt that Yo-Yo Ma is a great musician and a great cellist, but tonight we also honor him because he is a great human being. Thank you, Yo-Yo Ma.

Barbara Cook, Neil Diamond, Sonny Rollins, Meryl Streep, Yo-Yo Ma: At a time of year when Americans everywhere are counting their blessings, we want to give thanks to their extraordinary contributions. They have been blessings to all of us. We are grateful that they've chosen to share their gifts, to enrich our lives, and to inspire us to new heights.

And I think, for all of us, each of us can probably remember some personal moment. Michelle, during the rope line, was talking about how her dad loved jazz and could hear Sonny Rollins blasting through their little house on South Side. And it's true: Everybody sings Neil Diamond songs no matter how many drinks they've had. [*Laughter*]

Yo-Yo Ma, unfortunately, my association with him is studying at law school, listening to Bach and his—no, it soothed my mind. [*Laughter*]

Meryl Streep, anybody who saw "The French Lieutenant's Woman" had a crush on her. I assume they—everybody remembers that. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. [*Inaudible*]

The President. I'm ad libbing here a little bit. [*Laughter*]

So each of them have made these extraordinary contributions, and it's worthwhile then for us to commit ourselves to making this a place where the arts can continue to thrive. Because right now, somewhere in America, there is a future Kennedy Center honoree practicing on some phone books or writing songs to impress a girl or wondering if she can cut it on the big stage. Let's make sure our young people can dream big dreams and follow them as far as they can go. And let's make sure the arts continue to be an important—no, a critical—part of who we are in the kind of world that we want to live in.

Tonight we congratulate all our extraordinary honorees. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:29 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to David M. Rubenstein, Chairman, and Michael M. Kaiser, President,

John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; Caroline B. Kennedy, daughter of former President John F. Kennedy; Jaye "Posey" Posner, former wife of Neil L. Diamond; Don Gummer, husband of Meryl Streep; and former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom.

Remarks on Payroll Tax Cuts and Unemployment Insurance *December 5, 2011*

Good afternoon, everybody. My number-one priority right now is doing everything that I can, every single day, to create jobs faster and to provide more security for middle class families and those trying to get into the middle class. And at this moment, that means making sure that nearly 160 million hard-working Americans don't see an increase in their taxes on January 1.

A year ago at this time, both parties came together to cut payroll taxes for the typical American family by about \$1,000. But as soon as this year ends, so does that tax cut. If Congress fails to renew this tax cut before then, that same family will see a tax hike of about \$1,000 a year. There aren't many folks either in the middle class or those trying to get into the middle class who can afford to give up \$1,000, not right now. And that's why Congress must act.

Although the unemployment rate went down last month, our recovery is still fragile, and the situation in Europe has added to that uncertainty. And that's why the majority of economists believe it's important to extend the payroll tax cut. And those same economists would lower their growth estimates for our economy if it doesn't happen.

Not only is extending the payroll tax cut important for the economy as a whole, it's obviously important for individual families. It's important insurance for them against the unexpected. It will help families pay their bills, it will spur spending, it will spur hiring, and it's the right thing to do.

And that's why in my jobs bill I proposed not only extending the tax cut, but expanding it to give a typical working family a tax cut of \$1,500 next year. And it was paid for by asking a little

more from millionaires and billionaires, a few hundred thousand people paying a little bit more could have not only extended the existing payroll tax cut, but expanded it.

Last week, virtually every Senate Republican voted against that tax cut. Now, I know many Republicans have sworn an oath never to raise taxes as long as they live. How could it be that the only time there's a catch is when it comes to raising taxes on middle class families? How can you fight tooth and nail to protect high-end tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans and yet barely lift a finger to prevent taxes going up for 160 million Americans who really need the help? It doesn't make sense.

Now, the good news is, I think the American people's voices are starting to get through in this town. I know that last week Speaker Boehner said this tax cut helps the economy because it allows every working American to keep more of their money. I know that over the weekend Senate Republican leaders said we shouldn't raise taxes on working people going into next year.

I couldn't agree more. And I hope that the rest of their Republican colleagues come around and join Democrats to pass these tax cuts and put money back into the pockets of working Americans.

Now, some Republicans who have pushed back against the idea of extending this payroll tax cut have said that we've got to pay for these tax cuts. And I'd just point out that they haven't always felt that way. Over the last decade, they didn't feel the need to pay for massive tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, which is one of the reasons that we face such large deficits. Indeed, when the Republicans took over the